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Marine Corps University  
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# ***MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES***

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***TITLE: ANALYSIS OF BRITISH TACTICAL ADAPTATION AS RELATED TO  
EXECUTION OF OPERATIONS DURING THE BOER WAR***

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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**AUTHOR:**

**Phillip J. Reiman**

**Major, United States Marine Corps**

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**Mentor:** **Cmdr. David A. Mee**

**Approved:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mentor:** **Dr. J. William Gordon**

**Approved:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** Analysis of British Tactical Adaptation as Related to Execution of Operations

During the Boer War.

**Author:** Major Phillip J. Reiman

12 April 2002

**Thesis:** Early British military involvement in the Boer War was wrought with failures.

During the course of this war the British military was faced with an enemy that they were ill prepared to fight. The eventual success of Britain was due to the adoption of new, and modification of established, technology and tactics that had failed to be identified prior to hostilities.

**Discussion:** This paper will analyze the circumstances and environment that necessitated the involvement of British forces and the subsequent adoption of new British tactics in the prosecution of the South African war against a largely amateur opponent. Although a capable military force the complacency of the British forces was found unwarranted in this war. Through the incorporation of *new* tactical ideas and technology, new in relation to then current training, the British forces were able to finally defeat the Boeren.

**Conclusion:** The application of established and previously successful tactics does not ensure victory. The preparation, thorough training, of a military force should focus on flexibility. As seen in the Boer War, only through change was the British military able to win. Had British training focused less on rigidity and more on adaptability the war would have been far less costly.

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## **Introduction**

The British empire of the 1800's required the constant maintenance of the colonial power. This effort involved the utilization of military forces throughout the world, ranging in environmental and social circumstances from the jungles of the Far East to desert plains of Africa. In the thirty years previous, from 1870 on, the British Empire had expanded by nearly five million square miles and with that land approximately 88 million more people came under British rule<sup>1</sup>. It was with the arrogant attitude "... that Britain had not only the capability but the right to rule over such vast dominions."<sup>2</sup> that the South African war was entered. The British involvement in this conflict was the result of political manipulation on the part of wealthy individuals who desired to possess the newly discovered mineral wealth of South Africa. This analysis will focus on the tools and tactics employed by the British military in the prosecution of this war. Specifically this paper will address the requirement of an armed force, regardless of skill, to be able to adapt and modify tactics and procedures in concert with the progression of a war. Officially, the Boer war lasted from October 11, 1899 to June 5, 1900<sup>3</sup>. In that time, referred to as the Tea Time War, 448,435 British troops were sent in defense against a reported 5000 Boeren<sup>4</sup>(proper German plural for Boer). Yet no amount of arrogance or glory of past conquests prepared the British Empire for a foe that refused to fight fair.

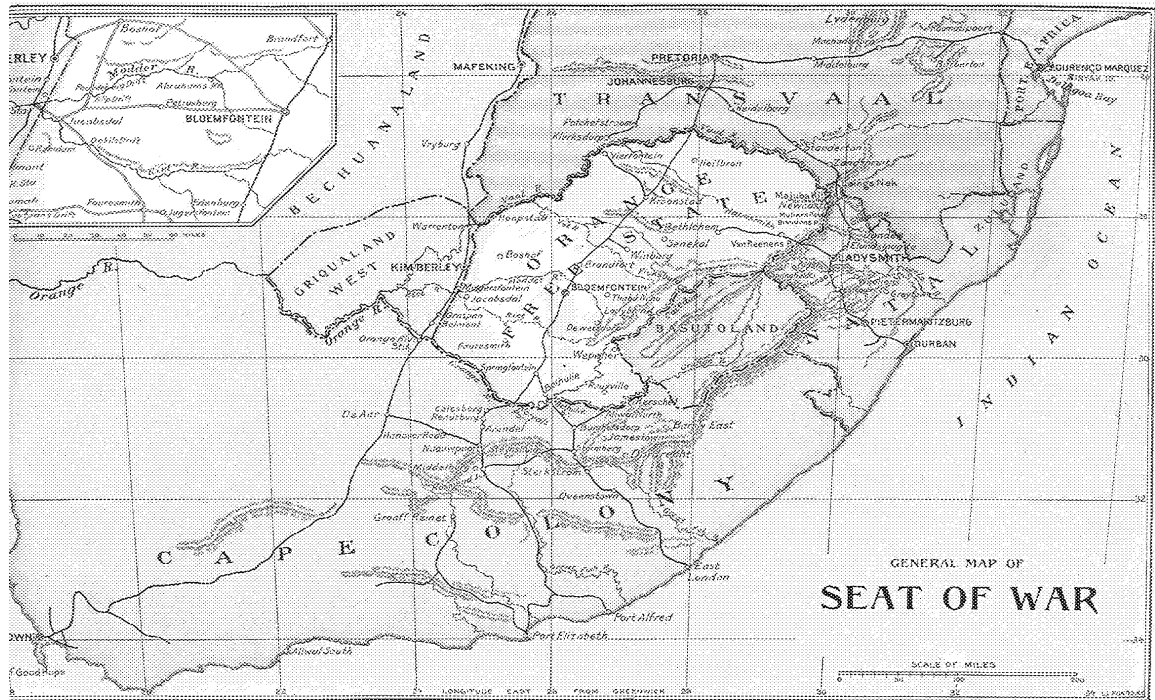
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<sup>1</sup> Byron Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War (New York: Harper & Row,1976), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Owen Coetzer, The Anglo-Boer War (London: Arms and Armour Press,1996), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



"Seat of War"<sup>5</sup>

## History

Permanently settled by Europeans in 1652, by the Dutch East India Company, the South African cape was established as a trading and re-supply port for the East Indies trade route. Although remaining under Dutch control for the next 150 years, the immigration of French Huguenots and Germans who melded in with the Dutch to form a people/culture called Boeren<sup>6</sup>. As a people, the Boeren were not complacent to remain settled and instead they expanded inland. This expansion was further fueled by their discontent over continued rule by the Dutch East India Company. Thus, in 1814 when the Cape Colony was officially ceded to Britain<sup>7</sup>,

<sup>5</sup> A.T. Mahan, The War in South Africa (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier & Son, 1900), p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> Farwell, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the Empire inherited a population already bridleing at colonial rule. The British, having even less cultural commonality with the Boeren than the previous colonial administration, created even greater social disharmony through the implementations of the British perspective on law and justice. The South African economy of the Boeren was slave labor based, and as such the British Parliamentary act freeing all South Africa slaves in 1834<sup>8</sup> was an immigration catalyst that caused a mass northern Boer migration called the “Great Trek”<sup>9</sup>.

Moving first into the Natal region the Voortrekkers<sup>10</sup> established a republic in 1838 only to be deposed by the British in 1842<sup>11</sup>. With building British animosity the Boeren once again moved, crossing the high veld<sup>12</sup> to establish the Orange Free State and the Transvaal republic. The establishments of these states were not without bloodshed<sup>13</sup>, yet by 1881 with formal recognition of these Boer states by Britain, hope for peace was not unfounded. What was to crush this hope would be greed.

The Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn, in themselves remote, tempestuous, and comparatively unproductive regions, for centuries derived importance merely from the fact that by these ways alone the European world found access to the shore of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The application of steam to ocean navigation, and the opening of the Suez Canal, has greatly modified conditions, by diverting travel from the two Capes to the Canal and to the Straits

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Translates to *african colonist*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Translates to *open land*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

of Magellan. It is only within a very few years that South Africa, thus diminished in consequence as a station upon a leading commercial highway, has received compensation by the discovery of great mineral wealth.<sup>14</sup>

### **Political Escalation/ Transvaal Invaded**

“Instead of rejoicing you would do better to weep, for this gold will cause our country to be soaked in blood.” Paul Kruger, President Transvaal.<sup>15</sup>

The prophetic nature of President Kruger’s statement addresses what was to be the root cause of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Boer/British Conflict. Prior to the discovery of gold in 1887, Transvaal, also known as the South African Republic, was extremely poor with an agricultural economy supplemented by small trade. The influx of Uitlanders<sup>16</sup> was initially, albeit cautiously, well received by the Boeren in that they provided sorely needed flow of funds. But as often is the case, such a benefit does not come without a cost. With the rapid increase in foreigners, it quickly became apparent that “... the government was ill prepared to cope with them. Less than 15 percent were married men who had brought their families with them and intended to settle. The rest were either single men who had left their families in their home countries and intended to go back as soon as they had made their fortunes.”<sup>17</sup> The Boeren, as a people, were fiercely independent and defensive of their national independence, the result of a 200-year struggle for self-determination. To this end the Transvaal government began to restrict the rights

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<sup>14</sup> Mahan, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Farwell, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Translates to *foreigner*.

<sup>17</sup> Farwell, p. 21.

of Uitlanders through various methods including oppressive taxes<sup>18</sup>. The resultant situation left the Uitlanders being "... excluded from all voice in the management of affairs, deprived of the rights of free speech and of free press, unable to obtain justice in the Boer courts, openly insulted and outraged without hope of redress."<sup>19</sup> As the Uitlander population continued to grow, their tolerance for the civil inequities decreased as their demand for relief grew.

The desire for representation and rights was not the underlying motivation for conflict. Instead it merely provided a veneer that could hide the ambition of wealth and power of others. The British ambition for gold and diamond wealth flew under the flag of franchisement that was unfurled in support of the oppressed Uitlanders, most of whom were British. Central to the escalation from words to bullets were the ambitious actions of Cecil Rhodes, Prime Minister of Cape Colony and the wealthiest man in the western world<sup>20</sup>. Viewing the Uitlanders unrest as an opportunity to attain British control over Transvaal, in support "... of a British Africa extending from the Cape to Cairo."<sup>21</sup>, Rhodes encouraged and armed a revolutionary force in Johannesburg, in concert with a force led by a friend, Dr. Leander Starr Jameson; an armed conflict was to begin. The plan was thinly veiled and the knowledge of it stretched from Kruger himself to the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, in London. In the course of planning, the revolutionaries in Johannesburg, eventually "... refused to participate when

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<sup>18</sup> Mahan, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> H.W. Wilson, With the Flag to Pretoria (London: Harmsworth Brothers Ltd.,1900), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Farwell, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

they learned that it was intended to hoist the Union Jack.”<sup>22</sup> Yet even without their support, Jameson rode into Transvaal with a force of 494 men, including eight machine guns and three light field pieces<sup>23</sup>. Seemingly doomed from the beginning the force was captured to the embarrassment of London and the political undoing of Rhodes. From a Boer perspective, the lessons learned would be far more substantive in nature.

### **Effects of the Jamison Raid**

“... the fate of the Free State, whether we wished it or not, was tied up with that of the Transvaal for better or for worse.” M.T. Steyn, President Orange Free State.<sup>24</sup>

The Jameson Raid did little to encourage any trust or feelings of goodwill between Transvaal and the Cape Colony. This distrust was only further fueled by the discovery of documents implicating the involvement of, or at least the knowledge of the British government concerning the raid<sup>25</sup>. Further Transvaal reaction, fed by the now exposed external threat, focused on the preparation for war. Utilizing their new found wealth, the Kruger government invested in the rearmament of the national forces through extensive purchase of “... cannon literally by the hundred and rifles by the thousands...”<sup>26</sup> The construction of forts at Johannesburg as well as the purchase of new Mauser rifles did little to quell

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Mahan, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

Uitlander discontent, yet with this escalation came the solidification of the two Boer republics<sup>27</sup>. “The Jameson Raid of 1896, engineered and paid for by a British Colonial Prime Minister, connived at by the British Colonial Office, and actually carried out by officers holding commissions in the British army, was an act of war.”<sup>28</sup> The Orange Free State government clearly saw the implication of British involvement and allied their republic to Kruger in defense of the Boer people.

What was to follow for the next three years would be a series of political battles in which the fate of Transvaal and therefore Free Orange Country would be decided. The discontent within the populace of Uitlanders continued providing the conduit for further British attempts to co-op the Boer Nations, and therefore their wealth, into the Imperial British sphere. To this end, Sir Alfred Milner entered into the still budding conflict. As the governor of Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa, Milner came to “... South Africa and went to work applying his genius to its very human problems. South Africa never recovered from the experience.”<sup>29</sup> Milner’s goals were not ones of peace; in fact his actions consisted of manipulating both his own government and President Kruger to the point where military conflict was inevitable<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Farwell, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Davitt, The Boer Fight for Freedom (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1902), P.41.

<sup>29</sup> Farwell, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Pakenham, The Boer War (New York: Random House, 1979), p.61.

## Prelude To War

Through a series of proposals and counter proposals with the Transvaal Government Milner maneuvered both parties into the position where no agreement was possible or rather allowed. In doing so the buildup of British forces began with the redeployment of forces into Natal, bringing the initial British numbers to 15,000<sup>31</sup>. As to be expected the government of Transvaal answered this influx of troops through their own mobilization<sup>32</sup>. The final spark to ignite this war would be in the form of a Boer “Ultimatum” to Britain, which consisted of four non-negotiable items:

First, to agree to arbitration on all points of mutual difference;  
second, that the British troops ‘on the borders of this Republic shall be instantly withdraw’;  
third, that all British reinforcements that had arrived after 1 June should be withdrawn from South Africa;  
fourth, that ‘Her Majesty’s troops which are now on the high seas shall not be landed in any part of South Africa.’<sup>33</sup>

Giving the British government forty-eight hours to comply or war would be declared; this ultimatum by the Boeren Governments was received as an “...insolent missive.”<sup>34</sup> The British people, accustomed to their perceived place of moral right in the world did little but inflame the public and government into action. The idea that the Great Britain empire would surrender to the demands of a, no better than a colony, republic united the public into a fervor. As a war, few expected it would last longer than six months and felt any concern about possible

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<sup>31</sup> Pankenham, p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Pakenham, p. 104.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, p. 16.



strains on British resources<sup>35</sup>. The conviction of the Boer peoples was no less passionate. Having been described as having a “...spirit of self-sacrificing devotion to national freedom without a single parallel...”<sup>36</sup> to the prideful Boeren, the war was to be of a personal nature. A deeply religious culture, the Boeren felt God would provide for their victory. In the last gambit of diplomatic maneuvers, linked as their fates were, Milner attempted to isolate Transvaal from the support of Orange Free State. In response to Milner’s demand for a declaration of intention, the President of Orange Free State, President Steyn responded with accusations of British hostilities, meddling with internal affairs, and attacks on independence<sup>37</sup>. The loyalty between the nations of Transvaal and Orange Free State, based on common culture, was cemented by Britain’s own self serving actions. With their intentions made clear to England, President Steyn telegraphed Transvaal, “We are ready!”<sup>38</sup>

### **Tactics**

The tactical methodologies employed by the British in South Africa were in a constant state of flux, specifically the infantry formations, showing additional evolution between the two basic phases of the war. Initially the tactics and

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<sup>35</sup> Farwell, p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Davitt, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

formations of the British reflected the result of their peacetime training. These troop formations centered around the presentation of a narrow troop frontage with extensive depth consisting of follow on lines of troops<sup>39</sup>. The battlefield in South Africa would prove incompatible with this style of battle. Much of the conflict would take place on the wide open veld having little to no concealment other than occasional undulations of ground, with sparse terrain features, more often than not thought by the British to conceal a Boer force. With such a battlefield a close concentration of troops invited their destruction. The ability of the Boer forces to bring overwhelming firepower, in the form of accurate rifle fire, machine guns and artillery brought the folly of the traditional British battle formation to light. In adaptation to the open environment the British found an extended front firing line a suitable tactic<sup>40</sup>. While not providing as much concentrated fire upon an objective, the extended line provided for less personnel density, therefore vulnerability. Additionally, the extended frontage provided the opportunity to fix the defender and maneuver the unopposed line segments in a wheeling or enveloping movement.

### **British Preparedness**

While adapting to the unfamiliar environment of South Africa, the British forces were additionally challenged by tradition and technology. From the perspective of depth of tradition the British military was unmatched. It could also be submitted that their ridged adherence to tradition was equally unmatched.

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<sup>39</sup> W.H.H. Waters, The German Official Account of the War in South Africa- October 1899 to February 1900, (London: John Murray), p. 219.

Rigidity may be too harsh a judgment, in that the Empire's experience, for nearly the previous half century, had been centered on combating relatively ill-organized and comparatively ill-equipped forces in their colonial territories. Yet times were changing, and the methods previously so successful for the British would have to also. Having previously being able to waged war *on the cheap*<sup>41</sup> the British would find themselves severely taxed in men, arms and supplies. Having "...only 70,000 troops available for foreign service, and ... seriously below strength in artillery and cavalry..."<sup>42</sup> Britain would be found wanting against the Boeren. The British shortfalls were not only limited to numerical end states but also included basic soldier skills such as rifle training. The British forces did not adapt to the increase in lethality, range, rate of fire and accuracy, brought on by new rifle technology. It was held that the independent firing of soldiers should not be allowed, and that only large volleys of fire were to be used against massed enemy only on orders of an officer<sup>43</sup>.

All their fire was in volleys, and for the most part harmless. The burghers would remain concealed until the volley was fired, when quickly rising at the sound, they reappeared the instant the danger was past to pour an accurate and deadly stream of independent fire into the British infantry, who, incapable of taking advantage of the natural cover stood in parade order. The front rank reclined, the second knelt, and the third stood erect, broken only by the gaps made by their appalling fire.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Wotton, *South African War Virtual Library – A Short History of the War*, URL: <http://www.bowlerhat.com.au/sawvl/history.html>, accessed 27 December 2001, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Farwell, p. 82.

<sup>44</sup> Alan R. Hiley & John A. Hassell, *The Mobile Boer*, (New York: The Grafton Press, 1902), p. 16.

To the Boeren such adherence to this or any tactic so apparently suicidal was beyond their comprehension.

### **The Battlefield**

The Boeren were a product of their environment, the South African veld. This land is one of extensive plains of grass bordered by sparsely vegetated mountains. Availability of water was the central requirement for the location of the widely scattered populations. In comparison to Germany where the population was 270 persons per square mile, Transvaal had 7.75 and Orange Free State 5.0 per square mile<sup>45</sup>. Described as being of *great sameness*<sup>46</sup> due to the lack of significant terrain, the geographic nature of the veld was not conducive to accurate maps of navigation by non-natives. Weather provided as much adversity as the terrain to anyone non-acclimated. Wide swings in temperature made for nights below freezing to be followed by days in which the high temperature nearly precluded physical activity. Either wet or dry, the seasons provided unique challenges to movement of men and material. During the dry seasons the distances to be covered by march were calculated around the availability of the scattered watering stations<sup>47</sup>. The wet seasons provided lush vegetation for the livestock but at the expense of mobility, the clay like soil becoming swamp like and bogging down

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<sup>45</sup>Waters, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.6.

wagons, carts and artillery<sup>48</sup>. The variance in climate, especially compared to the European homeland would exact a high toll on the British army. South Africa was home to the Boeren and as such the influences of the environment on their forces were dampened by experience. To the British however, the lack of acclimation, and the exposure to new diseases caused their force to “...retain only a fraction of the efficiency that they would possess in Europe.”<sup>49</sup>

### **The Individual Soldier**

The confidence of British military officials and politicians alike was to be proven mislaid. Although the British had a well-trained force, in comparison to the European standard, the military was not prepared for the type of enemy grown on the veld. The modern battle was to prove not suited to the then accepted leadership technique utilizing tight control over infantry units. Such control centered on the orderly advancement of tightly formed troops to a distance in which a *shock action* could be delivered to the enemy.<sup>50</sup> An enemy that was to be conveniently, if not politely waiting exposed as the formation advanced. Through this tactic the British, “...attempted the storming of the hill...by advancing in close

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Hubert DuCane, The German Official Account of the War in South Africa- March 1900 to September 1900, (London: John Murray), P. 331.

order and they met a fire so withering and concentrated that they utterly failed in reaching an effective position.”<sup>51</sup>

The British leaders were faced with battling an individual, an individual who valued his own life. The Boer soldier is described as “...more a hunter than a soldier.”<sup>52</sup> As a hunter the Afrikaners was raised to take advantage of the country, to seek all available cover, and to maneuver himself into range of his quarry undetected. These were not romantic high ideal lessons; rather they were necessary skills to eat. Yet these same survival skills translated easily to combat. The Boeren were not driven by martial pride, in that “...he would quit a dangerous position without damage to his moral strength, and, instead of holding out to the last, he would occupy a new one.”<sup>53</sup> Unlike their British foe, who lacked the training and precision for long range marksmanship, the Boeren were considered to be comfortable at fighting at extreme ranges<sup>54</sup>. At these ranges, the individual prowess of the soldier became critical. Due to their independent nature, the action’s of the Boer soldier lent itself to a common-sense approach to target engagement, taking under fire the target he felt most threatening and/or important<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Hiley, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Waters, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> DuCane, p. 325.

<sup>55</sup> DuCane, p. 326.



F. J. Waugh.]

WHY THE BOERS WERE ABLE TO HOLD US IN CHECK.

It is clear now that the earlier victories of the Boers were largely due to their prudent habit of keeping out of sight.

## **Boer Tactics<sup>56</sup>**

Effectively skilled at the defense the Boeren waged a war of limited strategic offense with the opening engagements of the war focused against the towns of Kimberly, Lady Smith and Meiking. On the tactical level however, the Boeren were far more adept and inclined to the defense. The Boeren knowledge of terrain was used to his advantage in the selection of defensible terrain<sup>57</sup>. In that the onus was on the British to actively attack and defeat the South Africans, the engagement areas were usually at the Boeren choosing. The methods employed by the Boeren were “...designed solely to repulse attacks, and based on the clinging to ground,...”<sup>58</sup> Through the application of concealment and the utilization of cover, the Boeren were capable of diminishing the effective fire a British attack could bring to bear<sup>59</sup>. The concealment protected the South Africans from the direct fire of the British rifle volleys and their cover shielding them from the effects of artillery and its’ associated shrapnel<sup>60</sup>.

## **Technology**

The rifle and the land were not the only tools in the Boer arsenal.

Much of the success of the Boeren was directly attributable to their

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<sup>56</sup> Wilson, p. 207.

<sup>57</sup> Davitt, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> DuCane, p. 327.

<sup>59</sup> Davitt, p. 73.



mobility. Every Boer soldier was effectively in the full sense of the term a mobile infantryman<sup>61</sup>, capable of advancing, maneuvering and retreating quickly as the tactical situation required. Riding was, like shooting, a life skill learned early in a Boer's life<sup>62</sup>. Although mobility is a characteristic of a military force, it is not usual to give the label of weapon system to horses, but with regards to the Boeren it is clearly the case. Without the mobility the animals provided, the Boeren would have been unable to engage and retreat against the numerically superior British on their own terms.



### Boer Mounted Infantry<sup>63</sup>

As a weapon system, the Boeren were not only effective in the employment of horses but as with all equipment only through proper maintenance can a system continue to be useful. The men of the Boeren

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<sup>60</sup> Waters, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Dewitt, p. 172.

<sup>62</sup> Farwell, p. 44.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, p. 288.

forces “...had been raised with horses and oxen: they understood their management.”<sup>64</sup> Being native to the country was not only to the advantage of the Boer soldiers but also to their livestock. The local animals having been *salted* were accustomed to the fauna and diseases native to South Africa<sup>65</sup>. The need for acclimation was sorely felt by the British in February 1900. The British use of horses in support of a counter march became “...an ordeal for men and animals. Many of the horses were newly arrived and had neither recovered from their long ocean voyage nor become acclimated. Within forty-eight hours some 500 horses were dead or too exhausted to move.”<sup>66</sup> While often neglected in historical recount, the value of oxen in this conflict should not be overlooked.

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<sup>64</sup> Farwell, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> William Harding, War in South Africa and the Dark Continent (Chicago: H.L. Barber, 1899), p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> Farwell, p. 129.



BREAKING CAMP: OX-WAGGONS MOVING OFF.

(Photo by Caney, Durban.)

### Oxen Transportation <sup>67</sup>

As the most effective and sturdy method to transport and pull loads, the ox was invaluable. In order for forces to move artillery pieces and to transport supplies not on rail, the material would need to be pulled by the ox. <sup>68</sup>

### British Failings

With the failure of Britain to concede to the demands of President Kruger's ultimatum, the nations of Transvaal and Orange Free State declared a state of war. The Boeren forces were not going to wait on the

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<sup>67</sup> Wilson, p. 260.

British, it was their livelihood and culture that was threatened. Fielding a largely partisan army the South African force was initially reported to exceed 50,000 (Table 1).

|        |                        |
|--------|------------------------|
| 25,411 | Transvaal              |
| 14,843 | Orange Free State      |
| 2,359  | Cape Colonials         |
| 8,925  | Other Inhabitants      |
| 734    | Foreigners             |
| 52,272 | <b>Chapter 2 Total</b> |

**Boer Force**<sup>69</sup>  
(Table 1)

The drive for rearmament, as a result of the Jamison raid, initiated by the South African governments included both small arms and artillery pieces.

A British intelligence report dated 1899 estimated the small arms inventory in excess of 60,000 pieces (Table 2).

|        |                  |
|--------|------------------|
| 34,000 | Martini – Henry  |
| 2,850  | Lee – Metford    |
| 24,000 | Mauser           |
| 2000   | Guedes           |
| 100    | Krag – Jorgensen |
| 62,950 | Total            |

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>69</sup> Waters, p. 19.

**Boer Small Arms**<sup>70</sup>  
(Table 2)

Even more interesting was that this same War Office report brought to light just how ill prepared the Boeren had been prior to the Jamison raid and what the end result had been:

1. That the Boers had only a few thousand Martine – Henry rifles before the Jamison raid.
2. That they had no Mauser rifles. (before the raid)
3. That the rifles subsequently purchased were bought in England as well as on the Continent, and
4. That it was from the United Kingdom that President Kruger obtained “the supply of ammunition sufficient<sup>71</sup> for a protracted campaign”!<sup>72</sup>

So it was apparent to the British early on that not only were they fighting a relatively well armed foe, but also against weapons and ammunitions supplied by their own country.

Excepting the Mauser Rifles and their Ammunition, and the Creusot and Krupp guns, the weapons and bullets with which the burghers have fought their English foes were supplied by English manufacturers and forwarded by means of English vessels to the seaport of Pretoria.<sup>73</sup>

It was of particular interest the British took with regard to the Vickers – Maxims (Pom-Pom). These were 37mm quick firing guns that fired a 1-pound explosive shell at a rate of 30 rounds per minute, to a range of 4000 yards.

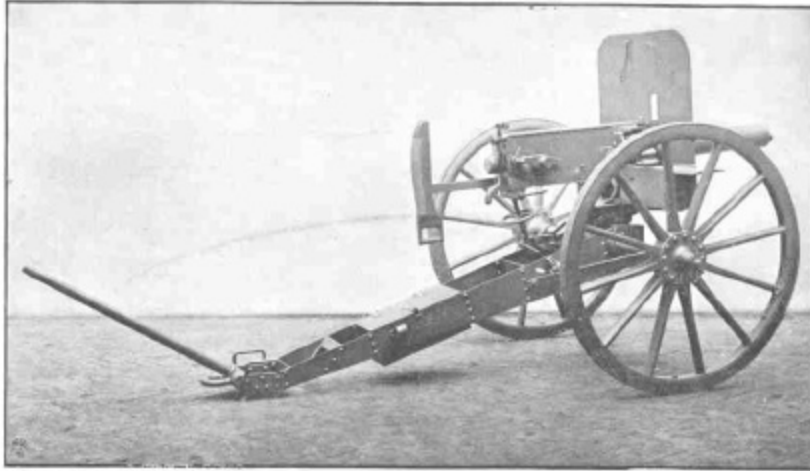
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<sup>70</sup> Davitt., pp. 59-60,66.

<sup>71</sup> Sufficient quantity was over 50,000,000 round by declaration of hostilities. Davitt, p., 66.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60.

<sup>73</sup> Davitt, p. 66.



Vickers – Maxim 1.45 in.<sup>74</sup>

This weapon was designed by the English for use by naval vessels but was not initially purchased. Bought by the Boeren, the Pom-Pom's capabilities were found to be well adapted for use on the veld<sup>75</sup>. The rapid rate of sustained fire this weapon had allowed the Boeren "... an extraordinarily demoralizing effect on the nerves, especially of the British infantry."<sup>76</sup> The lesson was not lost on the British Royal artillery and the weapon was eventually purchased and successfully fielded in South Africa<sup>77</sup>.

To an even greater degree than the small arms purchases, the Jamison raid compelled the modernization of the South African artillery and machinegun inventory. Although, at the beginning of the conflict, the total numbers and types of artillery/machineguns was not clear to the British by the beginning of the war the Boeren had purchased 27 pieces of artillery and 55 machineguns (Table 3,4).

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<sup>74</sup> Wilson, p. 71.

<sup>75</sup> Farwell, p. 44.

<sup>76</sup> Waters, p. 228.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Trew, The Boer War Generals (Great Britain: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p. 11.

|    |                       |                      |    |                  |                         |
|----|-----------------------|----------------------|----|------------------|-------------------------|
| 4  | Creusots              | 155 mm <sup>78</sup> |    |                  |                         |
| 4  | Krupps Howitzer       | 120 mm <sup>79</sup> |    |                  |                         |
| 8  | Krupps (quick fire)   | 3 inch <sup>80</sup> |    |                  |                         |
| 6  | Creusots (quick fire) | 3 inch <sup>81</sup> | 24 | Vickers – Maxims | 1.45 inch <sup>83</sup> |
| 5  | Vickers (quick fire)  | 3 inch <sup>82</sup> | 31 | Maxims           | .303 <sup>84</sup>      |
| 27 | Total                 |                      | 51 | Total            |                         |

**Boer Artillery**  
(Table 3)

**Boer Machineguns**  
(Table 4)

### British Forces

The beginning of the hostilities found the British lacking in personnel and equipments. During the month prior to the war the British cabinet authorized the deployment of 10,000 troops to the colony of Natal<sup>85</sup>. This force was to oppose a Boer force over three times this size<sup>86</sup>. Actually this deployment was more for show in nature in that the British government was hesitant to send a force any larger for fear of provoking Boer aggression<sup>87</sup>. As the deadline for the Boer ultimatum passed and hostilities began, the mobilization of the British Reserves

<sup>78</sup> Alan R.I. Hiley and John A. Hassell, The Mobile Boer: Being the Record of the Observations of Two Burgher Officers (New York: Grafton Press), p. 36.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Waters, p. 21.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Also known as the “Pom-Pom”, Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Spenser Wilkinson, War and Policy (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 381.

<sup>86</sup> Farwell, p. 57.

<sup>87</sup> Wilkinson, p. 381.

was affected. Under the command of General Buller, approximately 47,000 men were assembled for deployment to South Africa<sup>88</sup>(Table 5).

| <u>Unit</u>           | <u>Normal strength</u> | <u>Fighting strength</u> | <u>Guns</u> |
|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| 1 Calvary Division    | 5,500                  | 4820                     | 12          |
| 3 Infantry Divisions  | 30,000                 | 26,430                   | 54          |
| Corps Troops          | 5,000                  | 3,450                    | 48          |
| Line of Comm/reserves | 11,000                 | 11,000                   | 0           |
| <b><u>Total</u></b>   | 51,500                 | 45,700                   | 114         |

**Mobilized Force (fighting strength)<sup>89</sup>**  
(Table 5)

The British army was to fall prey to a trap of their own making. The military was to find that previous success was not to be realized by the continued application of their past tactics. “The British army, like most armies, was a conservative institution that resisted change, and always had.”<sup>90</sup> The incorporation of new technology was consistently met with skepticism, while an infantry-centric leadership relied on the common soldier. The eventual transition from muzzle loading cannons<sup>91</sup> to breach loaders was slowed as was the incorporation of machineguns, due to this resistance to change. This resistance was not only applied to technology but also bled over into the areas of strategic

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<sup>88</sup> Farwell, pg. 60.

<sup>89</sup> Wilson, p. 59.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>91</sup> Some breach loading cannons were deployed to South Africa. Trew, p., 12.



vision, staff organization and battle planning<sup>92</sup>, and it was with these tools that the British forces had set sail for South Africa.

The artillery deployed by the British during this war exceeded 500 guns<sup>93</sup>, of various makes, and numbers. The standard British field piece was the 15 pound breach loader, with the horse artillery being equipped with 12 pounders.

Comparison of range between the British and Boer artillery illustrated the British shortcomings. The 12 and 15 pounders had a range of 5200 and 5500 yards respectively in contest against the Boers standard 75 mm which had a range of 8500 yards<sup>94</sup>. Outranged as it was, the British artillery was hampered by institutional doctrine as well. Through employment doctrine and regulations the British field pieces were even further hindered by the institutional view that the effective ranges were from 1500 to 3000 yards, therefore the British forces only practiced to this envelope of employment<sup>95</sup>. Gunnery skill therefore was lacking on the part of the British. Whether attributed to the Boeren "...clearness of vision..." or "...extreme quickness in finding correct range..." the Boeren "...accuracy of aim over their English adversaries, was apparent in every engagement."<sup>96</sup> It was also the British held belief that artillery alone, as it had in the past, could and would through extended bombardment lasting hours to even days be applied in order to neutralize the defending forces allowing the infantry to independently advance after cessation of firing.

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<sup>92</sup> Farwell, p. 87.

<sup>93</sup> Trew, p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Wotton, *South African War Virtual Library – Weaponry of the Anglo-Boer War*, URL: <http://www.bowlerhat.com.au/sawvl/weapon.html>, accessed 27 December 2001, p. 1.

The supposed fire-preparation of the attack existed, as a matter of fact, only in the imagination of the British leaders, and the infantry actually advanced to the attack of an absolutely unshaken adversary. Consequently the artillery bombardment was, as a rule, quite ineffective. The advance of the infantry which next ensued was, it is true, supported for a certain period by artillery fire, but when the infantry got within close range, and just when the Enemy's rifle-fire began to produce the maximum effect on it, at the very moment, that is, when the support of the guns was most essential to it, they ceased fire, owing to anxiety lest any shell should by accident fall in its ranks.<sup>97</sup>

The employment faults were not limited to the fire-support role but also extended into the realm of organization and maneuver. Large mass employment, per doctrine, was attempted but proved to be a failure for several reasons. The first was the inherent vulnerability of concentrated large number of guns to counter battery fire from their ranged Boer forces. Additionally the smaller artillery formations utilized by the Boeren afforded greater maneuverability. Through maneuver the guns were both better protected and also had the capability to advance/move quicker to better bring fire to bear. By not having artillery at least equal to the capability of the Boeren and failing to employ/adapt their assets to the battlefield environment, the British failed to achieve successful utilization of their artillery.

The standard small arms issue of the British infantry at the time of the Boer war was initially the Lee-Metford and the Lee-Enfield rifles of the .303 caliber with subsequent follow on fielding of the new Lee-Enfield<sup>98</sup>. Both the Boeren Mauser and the British Enfield possessed a five round internal clip but the British weapon

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<sup>95</sup> Waters, p. 29.

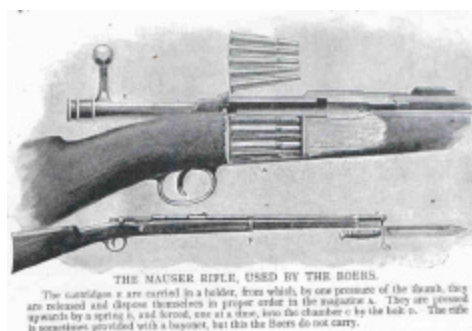
<sup>96</sup> Davitt, p. 280.

<sup>97</sup> DuCane, p. 329.

had a distinct disadvantage. The British rifle required the loading of each round singly, as opposed to the Boer rifle that was loaded through a five round clip. In terms of rapidity of fire, both weapons being bolt action, the weapons were equal. It was in the reload interval that the difference became apparent.



Lee – Enfield<sup>99</sup>



Mauser<sup>100</sup>

“Thus, while a British soldier could fire five rounds as fast as a Boer, the latter could fire fifty rounds faster than the soldier could fire twenty because of the speed at which he could reload.”<sup>101</sup>

### British Leadership Training

Of all the shortfalls facing the British forces, leadership was probably the most glaring. This war was to illuminate the training shortfalls of the British military. As a historical force, the prowess of the British infantry was not questioned. What was questionable was the training they received prior to going to war. Many of the established tactics were developed for large maneuvers. With these large maneuvers would come the experience of infantry, cavalry and artillery

<sup>98</sup> Trew, p. 12.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, p. 74.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Farwell, p. 43.

integration. The problem centered on the fact that the large units around which these maneuvers were designed were not constituted during peacetime.

Therefore the Generals and their staff were not afforded the opportunity to train in peacetime the forces they would command in war<sup>102</sup>. Facilities and training grounds for maneuvers were additionally restricted; the geographic nature of England lacked the adequate size and variety to properly provided adequate tactical training.<sup>103</sup>

In England – India formed and exception- manoeuvres on a considerable scale being rare, there had been little opportunity to develop the marching powers of the troops, to increase their intelligence in reconnoitering, to train the leaders in handling large masses, or to prepare the different arms to work together in action. The army was trained for detachment warfare, but not for a great battle. It was not recognized that unity of direction, the combined action of the three arms in the fight, and the ruthless employment of the last man can alone ensure success in war.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Boeren Success**

Utilizing their initial superiority in both forces and mobility the combined forces of Transvaal and Orange Free State invaded the British colony of Natal. The preemptive nature of this attack was multiple axis and over 38,000 strong.<sup>105</sup> The overarching plan was a two front attack, one focusing on the fielded British army located around Dundee or Ladysmith, the second moving from the west to capture Kimberly, Vryburg, and Mafeking. The follow on focus would be a south thrust

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<sup>102</sup> Waters, pp. 25.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-28.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

in hopes of encouraging a general anti-colonial uprising. It was hoped that the success of these operations would compel the British to sue for peace in the region.<sup>106</sup>

Viewing the Boeren actions from both a operational and strategic perspective it becomes apparent that operational success did not provide a strategic victory. Though not without some defeats at a tactical level the Boer Forces were quickly able to execute offensive operations that resulted in sever British loses, and the setting siege to the towns of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberly. To this point the Boeren had chosen the battlefields, but once locked into the set-piece siege of these three towns, the Boeren momentum was lost.

Regardless of their initial success, the Boeren army was to realize the shear quantity of British forces, arriving at a rate of 30,000 per month, could not be defeated force on force.<sup>107</sup> With the influx of new troops and the eventual inflow of over ½ million horses the tides of battle changed as the British forces began to overcome their prior inertia, and put to use the hard learned lessons of the previous months.

### **British Reversal**

The achievement of overwhelming numerical superiority, under the command of Lord Frederick Roberts and his Chief of Staff Lord Horatio Kitchner, foretold

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<sup>105</sup> Farwell, p. 57.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

the defeat of the Boer forces, and the emergence of a more capable and responsive British military. The relief of the siege was the beginning of the British push that resulted in the capture of the Transvaal and Orange Free State capitals in May and June 1900. With the capture of the belligerents' capitals the war was "practically over"<sup>108</sup>, at least the British would think so.

The tides of battle did not change without a change in tactics. This period was marked by the incorporation of new methods "... the tactics of modern war..."<sup>109</sup> No longer did the British march into battle without the covering fire of artillery, instead they utilized a creeping barrage to cover the advance. An advance that was distinguished by rushes not lock step marches.<sup>110</sup> What the British still had failed to comprehend though was the nature of who they had been fighting for the previous nine months. Individuals who felt compelled to continue a fight against overwhelming odds in order to defend their homeland and families against an oppressive force. From such an environment sprang the fighter the British were even less prepared to battle.

### **Guerrilla War**

To call the latter successes of the British the end of the war would be to neglect another two years of warfare. A war to marked by further evolution of tactics by

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<sup>107</sup> Farwell, p. 240.

<sup>108</sup> Lord Roberts as quoted in Pakenham, p.486.

<sup>109</sup> Pakenham, p. 486.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

the British but most notably the adoption of guerilla warfare techniques by the Boeren. By this point any previous offensive hopes on the boeren part were put aside in support of smaller hit and run attacks. “ these engagements were not , as the British believed, the last struggles of a defeated and dying enemy.”<sup>111</sup> by the end of 1900 the British were more interested in leaving South Africa and going home than ensuring an end to hostilities. This interest left the British forces in South Africa to deal with the lose of leadership, troops and the breakdown of their supply system.<sup>112</sup> The leadership of the British forces fell to Lord Kitchner on departure of Lord Roberts. With a force of 200,000 men against a guerillas force of 20,000<sup>113</sup>, a cursory glance would give the advantage to the British force. This was an advantage that could only be realized if the British managed to find the guerillas.

It was Lord Kitchner’s task to find these Boeren. Without an overall strategy to focus the Boeren effort, their attacks were limited to attempts of British harassment focused on railroads, communication lines and most importantly the garnering of local support. Cape Colony was the most populated colony in South Africa and through them the Boeren hoped to foster an uprising, thus denying the British their invasion base.<sup>114</sup> The superiority in British numbers would deny any notable incursions by the Boeren into the colony. The actions of the Boeren however, became predictable and as such gave Lord Kitchner a focus for his own strategy.

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<sup>111</sup> Farwell, p. 324.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.323.

<sup>113</sup> Pakenham, p.525.

<sup>114</sup> Farwell, p. 326.

## Counter Insurgency

Lord Kitchner, faced with declining public interest and support developed a two phase strategy. First, in order to protect the railroads and communications lines a "...blockhouse system..." was built which eventually covered 3,700 miles, with over 8,000 steel reinforced earth-worked blockhouses. Not only did the system protect the communication and rail lines but also it also effectively eliminated the Boeren ability to move freely across the veld. The second phase, incorporated concurrently with the blockhouses was to be a technique that although not foreign to the British, having utilized prior in the Indian frontier, would be termed "barbarous"<sup>115</sup> in England. Where Lord Roberts had been accused of "velvet glove" policies Lord Kitchner would not face such accusations, instead he "...undertook deliberate, thorough, wholesale destruction of farms: all buildings burned to the ground, all crops set alight, all animals slaughtered, hundreds of square miles turned into waste land."<sup>116</sup>

The elimination of mobility by the block houses and the denial of sustenance and resources left the Boeren without the one thing that had preserved them so far the freedom to operate independently of towns and supply lines. Without this internal support the Boeren forces became susceptible to the British military who began systematic sweeps to "round up" the remaining Boeren forces concluding the hostilities.

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<sup>115</sup> Farwell, p. 353.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.



## Conclusion

In hindsight the failings of both the British government and the military are quite apparent. The government of Britain was manipulated by the self interest of a select group of individuals. By allowing greed motivated citizens to dictate foreign policy the British government neglected the common good of the Empire. The thoughtless application of military force by Britain was shortsighted and costly, yet this war, served to provide a much-needed warning to their military leadership. The fact that the latter tactics of the British forces were successful in bring a final end to the conflict is unquestionable. What is most notable however, is that the British military was not the same force in May 1902 that had started the war two years prior. In that short time the British military was introduced to and bloodied by the technology and tactics of *modern warfare* as utilized by a small group of colonist half a world away. The need for continued military innovation should not be the only takeaway from this conflict. Instead, the lesson should be seen in the importance of a military's capability to adapt, system wide, while engaged in conflict. No amount of training or preparation will guarantee the success of a military force unless the enemy himself is bent on his own destruction. Without the convenience of such a self-defeating enemy, victory can only be obtained through continual tactical adaptation. Had the British fostered and developed this adaptive capability during peacetime they would not have had such a costly lesson during the war.

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